Undercurrent
Helen Pynor and Bronwyn Thompson
Curated by Noella Lopez

MOP Projects
19 July - 5 August 2007
Thursday - Saturday 1 - 6 pm
Sunday - Monday 1 - 5 pm
New location
Shop 2, 27-39 Abercrombie Street
Chippendale NSW 2008
(02) 9699 3955
mop@mop.org.au
www.mopprojects.org

MOP Projects
19 July - 5 August 2007
Thursday - Saturday 1 - 6 pm
Sunday - Monday 1 - 5 pm
New location
Shop 2, 27-39 Abercrombie Street
Chippendale NSW 2008
(02) 9699 3955
mop@mop.org.au
www.mopprojects.org

Above: Bronwyn Thompson, I’ll be your Girl, 2006, still from single channel video and sound installation, 3 mins 19 secs loop.
In our increasingly ocularcentric culture, we’ve come to take it for granted that by visualising the body internally and externally, we will access the truth of the person. We photograph ourselves obsessively and build and confirm our identities by reference to the images that surround us; we try to assuage our anxieties about the internal workings of our bodies by using ever more sophisticated medical imaging devices to look at it. Yet, rather than bringing us closer to the truth of what it means to be human, this fixation on the image may serve to distance us from the pleasure and wonder of embodied experience.

Undercurrent brings together two artists interested in the question of how to render the image itself. Experimenting in different ways with the spatial possibilities of the image, each artist is informed by the broad feminist project that critiques the privileging of mind over matter, and that explores alternatives to the objectifying power of the gaze. The body - with its inherent discomforts and desires - and its representation is compromised by the cultural heritage of medical specialisation, where we face the possibility of having to give up the image as a fetish used to ward off the frightening instability of the self. The artists’ sophisticated visual language allows them to achieve a rare feat: to mount a critique of looking and visualising while simultaneously offering us visual pleasure.

Helen Pynor’s red sea blue water (2007) comprises seven life-size panels of dark green glass leaning against the wall. Embedded in each is an early photographic image composite: a hand embroidered text whose tendrils reach into plumes of smoke towards a bodily organ - lung, heart, intestine - apparently suspended like plumes of smoke towards a bodily organ. Embedded in each is an eerie photographic image-composite: a hand embroidered text whose tendrils reach into plumes of smoke towards a bodily organ - lung, heart, intestine - apparently suspended like plumes of smoke towards a bodily organ. Embedded in each is an eerie photographic image-composite: a hand embroidered text whose tendrils reach into plumes of smoke towards a bodily organ. Embedded in each is an eerie photographic image-composite: a hand embroidered text whose tendrils reach into plumes of smoke towards a bodily organ.

The work thus evokes the question of the relationship between how we see ‘the body’ and how we experience our own bodies. Given the excessive visual mapping of the body’s interior facilitated by technology and medical specialisation, we are less in what we ourselves feel and increasingly discount the homespun community wisdom captured in Pynor’s text. As Walter Benjamin so astutely observes, the work of the camera is analogous to the surgeon’s scalpel, cutting deep into our reality. In one sense, Pynor is attempting to disassociate the work of the photograph with that of the reality-wielding scalpel, to remind us of alternate ways to access the truth of the human subject. In her photographic sculpture-installation, the certitude of science as represented by the realistic photographs of actual bodily matter is compromised by the cultural heritage of medical specialisation, as well as the medical treatment that accentuates the constantly shifting nature of reality, its pernicious diffusion, drift and porosity.

While Pynor’s work invites us to consider the objectification through the image of the body’s interior in the discourse of science, Bronwyn Thompson brings us back to the body’s exterior, and the role we assume we have played in fixing notions of self. As an image maker who cut her teeth in commercial photography and its demands for a precise aesthetic – the blushing bride, the happy family - her quest (however elusive it might prove) is for a way of representing that does not embalm the subject and fully being. In the video installation I’ll be your girl (2006), Thompson’s video installation attempts to complicate the gaze and its expectation of control, to create an aesthetic experience where we face the possibility of having to give up the image as a fetish used to ward off the frightening instability of the self. The artists’ sophisticated visual language allows them to achieve a rare feat: to mount a critique of looking and visualising while simultaneously offering us visual pleasure.

As an image maker who cut her teeth in commercial photography and its demands for a precise aesthetic – the blushing bride, the happy family - her quest (however elusive it might prove) is for a way of representing that does not embalm the subject and fully being. In the video installation I’ll be your girl (2006), Thompson’s video installation attempts to complicate the gaze and its expectation of control, to create an aesthetic experience where we face the possibility of having to give up the image as a fetish used to ward off the frightening instability of the self. The artists’ sophisticated visual language allows them to achieve a rare feat: to mount a critique of looking and visualising while simultaneously offering us visual pleasure.